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Morrison, Claudio ORCID logo ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3041-8606>, Sacchetto, Devi and Cretu, Olga (2013) International migration and labour turnover: workers' agency in the construction sector of Russia and Italy. *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, 5 (2) . pp. 7-20. ISSN 1736-874X [Article]

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# International Migration and Labour Turnover: Workers' Agency in the Construction Sector of Russia and Italy

Claudio Morrison\*, Devi Sacchetto & Olga Cretu

## Abstract

This article focuses on migrant workers' agency through exploring the relationship between working and employment conditions, on one side, and labour mobility, on the other. The study is based on qualitative research involving workers from Moldova and Ukraine working in the Russian and Italian construction sector. Fieldwork has been carried out in Russia, Italy and Moldova to investigate informal networks, recruitment mechanisms and employment conditions to establish their impact on migration processes. Overcoming methodological nationalism, this study recognises transnational spaces as the new terrain where antagonistic industrial relations are rearticulated. Labour turnover is posited as a key explanatory factor and understood not simply as the outcome of capital recruitment strategies but also as workers' agency.

**Keywords:** labour, international migration, post-socialism, construction sector.

## Introduction

Labour migration has so far been explained by referencing wage differentials, the relative ease or difficulty of relocating to another country and the absence or presence of support networks (Piore, 1979; Portes, 1996; Massey & Taylor, 2004). We understand this phenomenon in relation to capital's historical need to constantly expand its socio-geographical areas of recruitment to escape industrial conflict and obviate labour turnover (Gambino & Sacchetto, 2009). High levels of turnover occur in workplaces characterised by hazardous working conditions, repetitive tasks and lack of autonomy in industries such as agriculture, construction and domestic labour (Moulier-Boutang, 1998; Stalker, 2000; Silver, 2003).

Empirically, the paper addresses a persistent gap in literature about labour migration from and within CIS countries. It also tackles related analytical and methodological limitations in migration scholarship. Despite a radical expansion in the last twenty years, migration scholarship is still constrained, among others, by host-country bias and a lack of consideration for social change (Castles, 2010). As Rinus Penninx pointed out in his valedictory lecture at the ninth IMISCOE Conference, methodological nationalism remains an issue and research focus still relies on concepts and preoccupations emerging from national politics of host countries. Research output is heavily concentrated in the 'Global North' and concerned with immigration to this area (King, Money & Murawska, 2011). As a result, CIS migration trends are neglected. A major barrier is also represented by 'the persistence of the ethnic lens' and 'the studying of transnational communities rather than transnational social fields' (Shiller & Caglar, 2009, p. 181; Nolan, MacRaild & Neville, 2010; see also Mannila & Reuter 2009).

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In order to overcome these barriers, the research on which the paper is based is framed in a transnational and class dimension. The study investigates migrant labour from Ukraine and Moldova to Italy and the Russian Federation, respectively. Following the migrants' own trajectories across spaces, labour markets and workplaces the research explores their individual and collective forms of agency. Key research aims include identifying the migrants' aspirations and expectations, their forms of resistance and their effects on migration patterns. Findings suggest that high levels of labour turnover exist at the crossroad between workers' exit and exhaustion in an industry where variable forms of coercion, and harsh working conditions consume a constantly expanding army of migrant labour. Migrants display a high level of awareness of their condition and a diverse range of strategies.

The paper is structured as follows: in the next two sections, we critically review the theoretical developments relevant to migration studies and present a historical and secular notion of turnover. The sector background briefly outlines migration processes and regulatory mechanisms relevant to the construction industry. The research methods outline is followed by two empirical sections that analyse migration decision-making, forms of recruitment, pay and working conditions and forms of workers' resistance. Finally, we identify similarities and differences in these systems and draw conclusions, challenging commonsensical views about migration in the region.

## Labour migration and turnover

Labour turnover measures the circulation rate of labour as a factor of production; in other words, the number of employees replaced by an economic unit during a given period of time. In order to understand this process though, one must recognise that it is real social actors we are dealing with, not just abstract economic categories. This research, specifically, retains the assumption of Labour Process Theory that a 'structured' antagonism exists in the capital-labour relation (Thompson & Smith, 2001; Elger, 2001). Labour turnover can, therefore, be understood as a manifestation of this antagonistic and unequal relationship. While the concept of exit already mentioned refers to workers' dissatisfaction, turnover captures more fully the complex dynamic between workplace relations, labour mobility and migration.

Under capitalism, the imposition of highly taxing and coercive work regimes has historically generated high labour mobility (Douglas, 1959). This can be seen as resulting from enterprise strategies and workers' own agency. Enterprises are interested in minimising reproduction costs and replenishing their workforce with younger and less combative employees. Yet, workers might decide to leave on their own accord creating recruitment shortages. Labour turnover, therefore, exists at the crossroads between exit and exhaustion and predicates to consume a constantly expanding army of migrant labour (Castles & Kosack, 1973).

Enterprises have displayed three strategies to solve labour shortages. Occasionally, they can concede to the demands of local workers, stabilising the workforce. More frequently, they seek solutions elsewhere: delocalising recruitment through migration or the economic activity via foreign investments (Meier & Rudwick, 1979; Staudenmaier, 1994).

The second option establishes a direct link between migration and labour turnover. The history of capitalist expansion is, in fact, intertwined with large migration flows through slavery, servitude and indentured labour (Moulier-Bootang, 1998; Massey & Taylor, 2004). If nowadays 'free labour' represents the prevalent form of migration, various forms of coercion and segregation continue to mark the condition of migrant workers, such as with 'posting' and subcontracting (Lillie & Greer, 2007). In industries such as agriculture, construction and domestic labour the impossibility of delocalisation means that long distance recruitment remains the main device to compensate for high turnover in these generally low-appeal sectors (Stalker, 2000).

The third option, delocalisation of production, though indirectly linked to migration, is equally significant to our research. The 'maquilladora' system based on cross-border FDI in Mexico provides a case in point (Sklair, 1989; Hutchinson Hutchinson, Villalobos & Beruvides, 1997). Work in an outsourced plant does not deter migration; in fact, stimulates it by disrupting the traditional local economy, imposing dreary pay and work conditions, and familiarising workers with motivational and economic structures of the host country (Williams & Passe-Smith, 1989; Sassen, 1996). A similar system is also emerging in Europe, characterised by the dislocation of distinctive economic activities by country and a corresponding segmentation of labour market conditions (Ellingstad, 1997). Eastern European workers have elected 'exit' as their primary form of resistance to this post-1989 restructuring (Meardi, 2007), prompting employers to design tighter forms of control, such as "subcontracting and worker posting /.../ to protect themselves from legal liability, while isolating migrants from the economic and social norms of the host society" (Lillie & Greer, 2007, p. 552). As in the past, 'guest workers' are unlikely to accept the place assigned to them by employers and 'host country' authorities (Castles, 2006). Historically, changes in migrants' plans related to their life cycle, the economic incentives offered by wealthier economies and welfare systems, as well as the opportunities for mobilisation afforded in democratic societies all conjured up to turn temporary and discriminated migrants into permanent settlers (Castles, 2006, p. 743). Even in a neoliberal age, Meardi's groundbreaking analysis of the social consequences of EU enlargements warns that labour 'also has an opinion of its own, unlike less problematic commodities such as potatoes and chairs' (Meardi, 2012, p. 2) and, therefore, cannot be shifted around at will.

If 'exit' has been adopted to explain migrants' outflow from the country of origin, 'turnover' shifts the focus towards their further trajectory at the destination's workplace and labour markets. It reminds us that mobility is not exhausted by migration. It also tells why further migration is sought after by employers, as long as conditions at the destination do not change.

### Labour Mobility and migration in the CIS

A high rate of labour turnover is a historical feature of the soviet economy as workers were said to 'vote with their feet', lacking any means of independent collective bargaining (Arnot, 1988, pp. 77-79; see also di Leo, 1980). Large cities, beginning with Moscow, relied heavily on migrant labour from the countryside, but their resettlement was socially as well as politically problematic. Since the 1930s, the soviet authorities imposed compulsory residence by introducing an internal passport system. Internal migrants, called *limitchiki*, were granted limited permits to work in cities. They suffered, albeit temporarily, the same problems of exclusion and exploitation faced by labour migrants elsewhere (Filtzer, 1994, pp. 27-30, Green & Weil, 2007). Case study research shows that with the disbandment of state farms and factories, following the collapse of Soviet Union, the incentive mechanisms sustaining enterprise internal labour markets have eroded, leading to massive labour outflows (Morrison, 2003; Lonkila & Salmi, 2005). In Russia, unprecedented internal mobility has coupled with large migration flows from neighbouring countries, establishing a regional migration system (Rios, 2006). On the western fringes of the former Soviet Union, labour redirects towards European Union and integrates in a transnational space, combining capital and labour flows (Gambino & Sacchetto, 2007). In both areas, the construction sector has been the primary beneficiary of migrant labour inflows (Zayonchkovskaya, 2009; Krings, Bobek, Moriarty, Salamońska & Wickham, 2011).

Industrial relations scholarship has identified different forms of recruitment and employment of migrants in the sector (Fellini, Ferro & Fullin, 2007). A common thread is represented by employers' drive to avoid national legislation and impose unfavourable pay and working conditions (Lillie & Greer, 2007). 'Exit' is the widely accepted concept in the field to explain Eastern European workers' mobility strategies (Meardi, 2007). Methodological limitations of the prevailing institutionalist approach, such as the preference for national and formal institutions, mean that much of the

workers' actual experience is left unrecorded (Peck & Theodore, 2007). Research in Russia is similarly concentrated on the management of migration flows (Zayonchkovskaya, Mkrtchyan & Tyuryukanova, 2009; Zayonchkovskaya, 2009) with few exceptions (Kozina, Karelina & Metalina, 2005). Focusing on transnational and workplace dynamics, this research aims at unearthing their expectations and making sense of their migration trajectories.

## Migrant labour in the European construction sector

Existing research confirms that the building industry represents the ultimate 'ethnic niche' because its immobility, fragmented work process and reliance on cheap labour favour migrants' employment (Fellini et al., 2007). It is also accepted that 'migrant labour plays an important role in the European construction sector' (Krings et al. 2011, p. 461). Migrant workers make up around 25% of overall employment in the EU sector (Stawinska, 2010), and similar if not higher figures exist for the sector in Russia (Zayonchkovskaya et al. 2009, p. 34; Tyuryukanova, 2009, p. 155).

Research has focused on labour market regulation as a factor influencing the amount of migrant inflows and employment conditions. In the EU, greater regulation in the north, with UK as notable exception, has favoured job posting and agency recruitment. In the south, a large shadow economy has allowed undocumented work and informal mechanisms of migration and recruitment to prevail. In Russia, CIS citizens are allowed to enter visa-free but are subjected to a 3-months work permit, which has engendered a system of circular migration that discourages integration (Voronina, 2006). Specific regulations for individual nationalities and fluctuations in the harshness of implementations have varied over the years. The compulsory residence or *propiska* system remains a constant. This means that both internal and CIS migrants fail full legalisation. Equally, employment practices remain highly personalised and informal. As a result, the majority of migrants lack a regular job contract (Kozina et al., 2005; Zayonchkovskaya et al. 2009, p. 13). The difference with Southern Europe lies in the role of networks that organise recruitment and are held primarily responsible for abuses (Human Rights Watch, 2009)

Common trends have also started to emerge. First, posting is supplanting individual migration as a form of recruitment in the EU (Cremers, 2007), allowing greater control for employers (Lillie & Greer, 2007). Equally, in Russia research, including our own, indicates that agency recruitment of teams from Central Asia is replacing Moldovan and Ukrainian migration based on informal networks (interview with expert, Centre for Social and employment Rights, Moscow 2012; see also Mansoor & Quillin, 2006). Significantly, experts at key Russian institutions also suggested that informal networks offered greater bargaining chances vis-à-vis agencies (interview with expert, RAN, Moscow 2010). A second common feature involves the use of bogus self-employment, set to avoid employers' contractual obligations. This is widely reported in the EU (Cremers, 2007; Krings et al., 2011, p. 461), and respondents confirm its use to this effect in Russia.

It is easy to conclude that informal networks and regulations concur to heavily constrain workers' agency, leaving them exposed to fluctuating market conditions (see Krings et al. 2011). Yet, recent trends outlined above, combined with previous histories of labour migration, suggest that workers' mobility is much harder to constrain (see Castles, 2006). Findings presented below unveil how workers themselves understand and attempt to overcome such constraints.

## Method

The article is based on the initial findings of the research project 'International Migration and Labour Turnover' (2010-2012), run by a small team of researchers based at the Italian university of Padua and at Middlesex Business School in London. The research entails collection of local secondary materials

and semi-structured interviews with experts, managers and workers. Interviews and participant observation have been carried out at work sites in major Italian and Russian cities as well as at migrants' places of residence. The research framework has emerged empirically out of the direct experience of FDI and emigration outflows from post-socialist regions where teams carried out extensive fieldwork. Middlesex researchers' work on post-soviet labour and Padua's interest in recent flows of migrants from such regions to Italy allowed complementarity between research agendas. Extensive experience in the field and access to gatekeepers has facilitated the selection of respondents and local collaborators.

Data collection employs ethnographic techniques pioneered by Burawoy (2007) and Clarke (1993) in the post-socialist context. A dialogic approach allows full appreciation of migrant workers' views, while avoiding postmodernist logocentrism (Burawoy, 1998; Ackroyd, 2004). Fieldwork in the country of origin allows an analytical shift from an exclusive host country focus, prevalent in Western Europe, to a regional approach. Empirically, it has also permitted a safer and more stable environment for both researchers and interviewees.

Expert interviews with academics, industry and civil society representatives, such as trade unionists, church ministers and NGOs, were carried out in Italy, Russia and Moldova. Data collection and analysis and parallel theoretical elaboration has developed in an iterative fashion with lead researchers meeting regularly, including visits to fieldwork sites. The development of interview guides, pilot tested in the regions, has been carried out jointly to guarantee consistency.

In Moldova, participant observation and in-depth interviews have taken place in three villages with eleven workers of Moldovan, Ukrainian and Russian nationality, their towns ethnically distinct but all marked by a socio-economic decline and high rates of emigration. Two trade unionists and a labour professor have been interviewed in Kishinev. In Moscow, expert interviewees include, so far, a demographer and a sociologist at RAN (Russian Academy of Sciences), two trade unionists – one from construction and one from a global union federation, a Moldovan entrepreneur, and a representative from a leading NGO promoting workers' rights. Discussions with fellow academics at the VSE (High School of Economics) have allowed further contextualisation of their views. Five further interviews with workers, including a brigade leader and a worker from the Volga region and two central Asian workers, broadened the perspective on workplace and recruitment in this highly segmented industry. In Italy, interviews were conducted in Padua and in other areas of the Veneto region. Semi-structured expert interviews were initially held with a vocational school master (1), SME association (1) and trade union officials (8). In-depth interviews were carried out with ten Moldovan and Ukrainian workers. A multiplicity of gatekeepers, research settings and perspectives among researchers has allowed unveiling the variety and complexity of migrant experiences, overcoming the classical limitations of methodological nationalism.

## Migrant construction workers in Russia

The migration experience in Russia is conceptualised as *zarabotki*, which is understood as temporarily leaving one's place of residence in order to earn a living. All those interviewed were not originally in the construction trade, and most of them have different plans for the future. Informal networks, based on personal connections, play an essential part in the migration process. Migrant workers indicate that family or friends either offered jobs or facilitated the search initiated by the respondent:

*My father and brother were on zarabotki on construction sites. In Russia, I went by myself: my friends work there.* (Stas, Cainari station 2010)

*I asked relatives from my village how to earn money and they said come over [to Russia].* (Petru, Cainari 2010)

Some respondents originally left for different jobs (“I first worked as a plumber in a company, then back home, then again in St. Petersburg I fitted fire alarms, then I worked as security guard,” Roman, Pervomajsk 2010). Construction proved attractive, at least until the crisis, since it is better paid and more rewarding than some of the menial jobs mentioned above (“Every job has its wage: I went where they pay more”, Roman, Pervomajsk 2010).

If family and friends act as facilitators, actual recruitment is carried out by intermediaries who work on site and are in direct contact with site managers or subcontractors. Once the migrant has been familiarised with the work and is acquainted with the bosses, he will await a call or seek an offer from them. On occasion, he can be required to recruit others and, over time, become a recruiter or brigade leader. This way, long chains of recruitment are constantly developed.

*Before, I used to come for fifteen days, sometimes as a simple worker, other times as a foreman – [now] I am the senior in my brigade. [...] In most cases, it is up to the ‘elders’ to select people. So, let say, I call up my team and ask if they know other workers. They can come up with suggestions, let say a cousin. (Vitja, Moscow 2010)*

Most respondents are returning migrants, observing the three-month threshold set by the state and enforced by employers (Roman: “I work for 3 months then home for 2-3 weeks, bosses know”). This pattern allows the migrants to recuperate from an arduous job and the often dismal conditions afforded by life in barracks on isolated construction sites (“[...]morally and physically I could not tolerate it,” Ivan, Pervomajsk 2010). It also proves highly advantageous for both business and the state. It allows the extraction of high productivity and maximum flexibility (“I would not have left if they kept paying; now it seems all right – they ask me back,” Dyma, Pervomajsk 2010).

Permanent resettlement is clearly perceived as an altogether different enterprise, as put concisely by Petru, who chose to move to neighbouring Transnistria instead:

*I would like to work in Russia but with my wife. I feel homesick if she's here and I'm there. I go on zarabotki if everything fails here. There are problems though: naturalisation is expensive and there should be a job with a fat wage, holidays and health insurance. (Petru, Cainari 2010)*

Turnover already appears a structural feature in Russian migration but so does the workers' awareness of its contradictions. Most respondents have not quit as early as Petru, but their accounts echo his remarks about the unsuitability of employment for long-term settlement and a stable family life. Their strategies respond to the conditions they experience in the workplace.

### Working in Russian construction: Informality, networks and turnover

Informality moves with the migrants who universally report irregularities in their migrant status or employment position. As CIS citizens, since 2001 they are required to register for immigration, obtain a work permit and ideally an employment contract too. Most of them failed one or more of these stages. The risk of hefty penalties has put pressure on bosses and employees alike, yet resistance on the part of employers is still strong and sometimes sustained by the workers' interest in higher pay.

*In Russia, I work without a contract. Even if I had a work permit, they employ without contract [...] the employer finds it inconvenient because of the 30% tax [higher contribution rate for migrant workers]. (Stas, Cainari station 2010)*



Workers are aware of the risks involved though: Andrei, age 23, comments after a second tour in Russia, "I don't mind either way as long as they pay. With a contract there are fewer chances that they cheat you and send you back without money" (Andrei, Zalotiefka 2010). What remains hard to find even for Russian nationals are genuine employment relationships, with actual pay and benefits matching the paperwork. Viktor, a Russian from the Volga provinces who works for one of the 'safest' employers in Moscow (a protégée of the former mayor with a steady procurement portfolio) voices equally sceptical remarks:

*I am officially employed, yes, but it's a fraud! We never get holidays and as for sick leave they only allow it in serious cases, which are normally their fault anyway.* (Viktor, Navoloki 2010)

Informality means that the workplace is governed by custom rather than law or collective bargaining, resembling in many aspects the paternalistic and authoritarian management of the soviet shop floor but with less bargaining power for the workforce. Pay and working conditions can vary significantly depending on type of site, size of firm and skills of the individual employee, but nationality is the primary factor deciding occupation and its conditions. Actual wages are calculated on the amount of work ("The employer prefers hourly pay, but in general everybody goes for piece-rate", Slavic, Moscow 2010). Working time can stretch from a minimum of nine up to eleven hours per day. Late hours and weekend work do not generally garner extra pay, and workers often bargain over timetabling. Virtually all respondents report payment in cash by the manager, the brigade leader or even from fellow colleagues. Payments are made in stages with only small sums anticipated for expenses; therefore, disputes over wage arrears are common. Work organisation is based on small teams or brigades, often ethnically homogeneous, performing specific tasks under the supervision of a brigade leader. Workers' interviews portray him as the target of resentment – "Brigade leaders, who get paid for work but sit and smoke" (Slavik, Zalotiefka 2010) – but also as a leader of whom workers have high expectations: "We do not get paid holidays: it's the fault of the brigade leader – he could do much more for his brigade" (Andrei, Zalotiefka 2010).

The whole employment and work relationship hinges on intermediaries, but workers do not appear to be at the mercy of brigade leaders. They try to turn this volatile system to their advantage by differentiating and selecting recruitment networks and constantly bargaining over conditions. A 'good' intermediary has to prove himself by guaranteeing jobs and regular payments:

*People were leaving all the time because of wage issues [...] someone was lining his pockets with someone else's money: this was our brigade leader.* (Fedor Cainari 2012)

*There are different intermediaries. For example, there is no work now in the taiga. But if someone else calls, I will go [...] I left [previous jobs] because of pay [disputes].* (Valentin, Cainari 2012)

Turnover, therefore, can be used by workers to their advantage. According to Prof. Mukomel (RAS, Moscow 2010) this has affected intermediaries, "Nowadays, they are interested in a stable market [...] this is decent form of employment relations, yet it exists as part of the shadow economy". The latter represent a stumbling block to reducing turnover. Another concern remains with the nature of work itself. Issues of health and safety rate high among workers' concerns:

*Yes, it is heavy and dangerous work. [Safety equipment] gets in the way of working [...] there were [fatal incidents], people fell off [...] in 4 years 2 died: a guy just arrived, no induction, fell and crashed to the ground. Minor injuries are more frequent: often something falls down on someone's head, leg or hand and [the protective helmet] is uncomfortable, falls off all the time.* (Viktor, Navoloki 2010)



Finishing jobs are less heavy and dangerous than structural work; the construction site, though, is always described as being awash with risks, especially when working at heights.

### Workers' agency: between informal bargaining and further mobility

Despite the many constraints to which they are subjected, workers display acute awareness of their condition and try to act upon it either individually or in small groups. Grievances range from wage issues to working time and poor working and living conditions. The informal character of the employment relationship and the lack of union support mean that such bargaining occurs in a direct, often personalised fashion, with line managers on site. Roman explains, "There are no trade unions over there; in Europe they defend [workers]. Here they do not exist, if only we saw them" (Roman, Pervomajsk 2010). Slavic's account summarises the options normally open to workers to further their grievances:

*One morning the brigade leader calls the managing director, workers refuse to work because of unpaid wages. He came to the site and said, 'Come on, let's get to work'. In a day or two he paid. Once he failed to do so and people started to quit. I went to his office - locals are afraid [to do it] - knocked on the door and wrote a statement: 'I demand to be paid'. He gave me only half of it. I have to live on something, and I also have a family. You just go and take the wage yourself. (Slavic, Moscow 2010)*

Individual mobility between firms, jobs and ultimately countries, remains the most common strategy for addressing those issues. Even recruiters or brigade leaders see little future in the profession as responsibilities are high, work is hard and pay stagnates. The crisis has increased risks of instability of work and earnings; as Slavic points out, "At my old workplace, when we left they did not take anyone. There are ten left, out of seventy. There are no jobs: before there were five sites, with the crisis there is only one left." Turnover, therefore, is not merely adjustment to market flexibility or migration regulation but reflects the migrants' pursuit of their own needs, such as stable earnings, good work relations and conditions. To this end, migrant workers engage in a multiplicity of strategies, including both geographic and professional mobility. Some develop skills as fitters or maintenance builders to access cleaner and better-paid finishing jobs, but self-employment also rates high in workers accounts: 'having my own thing', 'becoming an independent repairman' or a 'truck driver', 'opening a garage' or 'setting up a small agricultural activity' in the home village were some of the alternatives to wage work. As for further migration, again, the most significant finding is the variety of directions and motivations, ranging from neighbouring Ukraine to Southern Russia and as far as Western Europe. Many workers appear reluctant to become 'migrants': family and social relations are an important need that shuttle work is meant to nurture. The argument paving the road westward is lucidly enunciated by one respondent, "Russian wages end on the Moscow ring road, here only a revolution will fix it; I'd rather go to Italy" (Tolik, Cainari 2010).

### The great leap: Migrant construction workers in Italy

Migrating to Italy from the FSU is fairly recent and appears to be an individual or family affair. There is little evidence from interviews of either network or recruitment structures but, as first migrants settled, chains facilitating mobility have grown. Earlier work experience in Russia is common, and reverse benchmarking, that is workers evaluating different work settings the same way businesses normally do, emerges from the accounts:

*Before people went to Russia for two, three months, but then they started to go to Italy [...]. I was also in Moscow [...] no legal contract [...] the intermediaries were mostly Russians who did not pay [...]. [Now] Russia has made the immigration law too. (Dimitri, Milan 2010)*

*[In FSU] the discipline is harsher than in Italy or Spain [...] let's say the boss is not only the chief, he feels like a king there. (Ivan, Padova, 2010)*

It also differs in that it is a financially and legally onerous enterprise, which generally implies a period of illegal stay. Family re-unification with spouses engaged in the much expanded private care sector is the only exception. Respondents refer invariably to the purchase of tourist visas, false residence permits or false passports as an entry device. Prices for such services vary considerably – from five hundred up to two thousands Euros. The debt burden forces migrant workers to maximise their earnings at any cost in order to pay off their debts. Respondents point out that:

*When you arrive at your destination it is best to immediately find a job. You are not looking which kind of job because your debt is two, three thousand US dollars. (Dyma, Padua, 2010).*

Repaying initial debts might take up to six months or even a year, forcing migrants to accept irregular jobs paid cash in hand, which, in turn, increases the risk of non-payment and other employment irregularities.

### The first stage: Working as 'illegal migrants'

Until 2007-8 finding an illegal job on a building site was a matter of days: "All people work in construction, because they find work more easily" (Sasha, Milan 2010). Migrant workers can easily move to where jobs are available, and selection for recruitment is carried out on the spot. Wages are initially very low, ranging from three to five Euros per hour, including transport but not meals. Working time ranges from nine to twelve hours, usually for six days a week. Initially, migrants will find work on construction sites through word of mouth, generally from other migrants. At busy times, recruiters are said to visit public locations, such as bars or squares, normally populated by migrants looking for journeymen. These jobs are poorly paid and normally without contract. This results in significant labour turnover as workers seek better conditions elsewhere.

*I worked without papers for a long time, four years. I started in Chiuppano, but I left that job because the owner was always edgy. While there I met a Slavic man with his own business and went to work with him. Two months and then I left: low pay and little to do. Then I went to work with an Italian [...]. (Dennis, Thiene 2011)*

Undocumented migrants working illegally can easily be subjected to harsh working conditions and abusive management. Increasingly, migrant workers can find employment in small businesses run by their own country's nationals or other migrants. Recruitment is informal and relies heavily on language-related ties. In such cases, workers feel under particular pressure to perform because of personal trust bonds with intermediaries: "Usually when you set up these teams, you know each other. If the boss needs manpower, you call a friend of yours, so your friend can feel a bit indebted to you" (Nicola, Milan 2010). This initial stage can be endured because of the prospects of integration, which usually imply regularisation of stay and access to trade union's protection: "Russia is for temporary jobs. Here, if you get the papers [leave to stay] you can stay for longer; if only you can manage to integrate." (Andrei, Curtarolo 2011)

## Work and employment conditions After regularisation: A new beginning?

Regularisation of stay has an immediate effect on employment conditions and reduces turnover. Most commonly, reported changes relate to formal employment, access to union services and reduced risk of abuse. Regularisation, they argue, may also lead to a reduction in working time: “Nine hours a day from Monday to Friday for about fourteen hundred Euros a month, sometimes Saturday morning when the boss asks” (Sasha, Milan 2010). Outstanding issues remain, however, concerning the role of the trade union, work organisation and the extent of integration.

To begin with, the union is described by respondents as an organisation providing discrete services, rather than a tool to organise and defend their interests in the workplace:

*The whole enterprise [workforce] has union membership. I've been there once because of an accident-related insurance claim, but I do not need it /.../ here they force you [to join the union]. (Giorgi, Padova 2010)*

*I am a union member from the very beginning /.../ When I need to fill up some forms I always go there; they are very kind all the time. If there is an issue with the employer though, I better deal with him directly, with the unions you never know how is going to come out. (Stefan, Padua 2010)*

As a result, workers are often left to fend for themselves in the workplace. Here, the contentious issue is represented by harsh discipline aimed at taxing production targets, augmented by ethnic segregation. In Italy, direct supervision prevails and strict discipline is imposed: “You can have a chat [with colleagues] but never stop moving; if you do, insults start flying at you” (Dyma, Padua 2010). Migrants with substantial work experience in both the East and Western countries exercise a sort of reverse benchmarking:

*I got used to it in Portugal: ‘you have to work all the time’. Even if you smoke, you always work; you keep going without a break. You must always move /.../ people who are upstairs in the big yard look at you and see if you are busy doing something. (Emiliu, Padua 2010).*

Ukrainians and Moldovans are also perceived and treated differently, exposing the extent of occupational segregation by country of origin. The division of labour among different nationals in the construction sector both in Italy and in Russia is succinctly captured in a worker’s sarcastic reply to the interviewer’s questioning:

**Vasile:** *To build a house [in Russia], as we put it: the Tajiks dig, we [Moldovans] do the walls and Ukrainians handle the roof.*

**Interviewer:** *How would it be in Italy? Who is the digger here?*

**Vasile:** *Well, here, what about digging, I am the one doing the digging.*  
(Vasile, Milan 2010)

Not surprisingly, working in Western construction sites does not feel any easier despite higher levels of mechanisation. Accidents followed by serious injuries, such as ‘loss of limbs’ or ‘broken ribs’, are relatively common among respondents. A worker who suffered from a fall comments, “I have worked here for a year; once I got injured /.../ if you suffer an injury it is not a good thing because after that they look bad at you, you understand? They need you to work; they do not need you to stay home sick, never” (Vasile, Milan 2010). Control by state inspectors and trade unions is largely absent: “For eleven years I have been working in Italy, but I have never seen any safety inspection on construction sites” (Emiliu, Padua 2010).

Some workers report moving into self-employment, whether as a career choice or because of pressures from employers. In the first instance, it represents an attempt at social mobility. Employers' pressure though is most commonly referred to as motivating factor, "I decided to start my own business because they forced me" (Bogdan, Milan 2010). These workers can then hire a relative or a friend or ask them to follow the same path. Some migrants resist the change, fearing discrimination over prices in sub-contracting work. They also note how self-employment offers flexibility for employers transferring the risk onto the migrant:

*Now you need to have good connections to land a salaried job, the bosses like it more this way. "Open your own business," they say, "and come to work with us". If there is work, you can work, but when there's nothing to do they say, "Go away; I will call you when I will have work for you again". (Sasha, Milan 2010)*

Self-employment has a dual aspect. When initiated by the migrant, it represents an attempt, like in the Russian cases, to escape the pressures of wage labour. However, findings suggest, consistently with existing literature, that its popularity owes more to the employers' attempts at countering workers' demands.

## Summary and conclusions

Findings from this study confirm known facts about labour migration in the sector: the motivating factor of wage differentials, the role of networks in recruitment, informality in employment and the stressful working conditions. They also contradict commonsensical assumptions about workers' acceptance of flexibility, their dependence on networks and, generally, their lack of strategic options.

In comparative terms, labour turnover in the Russian and EU construction industry is structurally different. In Russia, job rotation is built around the visa waiving regime, and the overall temporary nature of employment allows for continuous and substantial turnover. This circular migration is entirely functional to the production system and allows workers to recuperate – in fact only just – from a disabling work routine. This migration system works also for internal migration. The system is policed by state control on immigration and by gang masters, but is also managed by the workers themselves. Positive changes in brigade leaders' behaviour can be seen as partly accommodating the workers' expectations. In Italy, migration is perceived as and acted upon by respondents in long-term expectations but remains dependent on obtaining work permits. Legalisation of stay and permission to work are associated with a decline in individual mobility. Both life and work stabilise around locally defined routines. The employment system allows for stabilisation, but both at the initial stages and later, employers' strategies – easy hire-and-fire and self-employment – mean that such opportunities can be easily reversed. In both areas, the increasing use of posting, sub-contracting, self-employment and agency work suggests the employers' preference for a more controlled management of migration flows.

Migration satisfies the workers' immediate need for higher cash earnings but falls short of their expectations and aspirations for stable employment, family plans and professional growth. Their attitude is not without consequences. In Italy, they seek regularisation and unionisation. In Russia, where this is not possible, they minimise trips or seek alternatives to *zarabotki*. Employers and states are reluctant to accommodate such pressures: in Italy, they force workers into self-employment; in Russia, they push recruiters to seek cheap labour further afield. In both countries, migration is willingly expanded in new forms: posted workers in the EU, Asian workers in Russia, shipped by agencies to replace 'free' migrants. Migration is playing an important role in casualising labour and consolidating employers' control. Turnover, however, represents both an indicator of its contradictions and a constant challenge to its reproduction.

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